

REPORTING PANELISTS: Reporters Martin Gershen (left) and Jim Lucas flank producer Sylvia Taylor at the OPC discussion, "How Good is Viet Nam Coverage?" They were among newsmen with strongly conflicting opinions on how the job is being done.

(Henry Senber photo)

NEWSMEN LIST PROS AND CONS ABOUT VIET NAM COVERAGE

By JOSEPH HARROW

Smouldering differences over the quality of reporting from Viet Nam flared up at the OPC May 1, as newsmen covering the war focussed on the sharp division among correspondents themselves.

It was the second controversial panel held under the auspices of The Edward R. Murrow World Affairs Forum and the OPC Foundation. (The first concerned 50 years of Bolshevik rule.) The event also was the twelfth in the Forum series, which has hosted Prime Ministers and other distinguished guest speakers over the past year. It played to an overflowhouse of top news media and US officials, correspondents from state-side all over the world.

Panelists were award-winning professionals Jack Fallon, UPI foreign news editor; Martin Gershen, Newark Star-Ledger bureau chief; Jim Lucas

Scripps-Howard Feature Syndicate, and Bob Young, ABC-TV Evening News anchor man.

Questioning and participating in the debate were Stan Swinton, AP Assistant General Manager; R.W. Apple, *The New York Times*; Richard Fryklund, former correspondent and now Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs; Roy Rowan, Life Assistant Managing Editor; Robert Siegenthaler, producer, ABC Evening News with Bob Young. OPC President Hal Lehrman moderated, and Sylvia Taylor was the producer.

Debate Rages

Under partisan fire were issues of "experience" for Viet Nam assignment, all-too-short tours of duty for newsmen, allegedly overplayed coverage of South Viet Nam atrocities and US failings, un-

favorable reports re the Viet Cong and the North, the factor of television's new "instant" coverage of the war.

Also argued: the reporting obstacles in an unusual war of fluid battle lines, the "gap" between editorial handling of copy and dispatches from the front; the credibility of US officials, and corruption in ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam).

Lehrman sparked the polemics. "What's been the quality of coverage from our overseas members and colleagues?" he asked. "Has the picture been distorted? Are our newsmen well-prepared to cover? Is there something wrong?"

Gershen said that when "history records" Viet Nam press coverage, "it will be troubled reading. This meeting is proof enough. Most reporters are brave, hard workers but the culture is completely different in Viet Nam. Reporters see things subjectively." Couple this with "inadequate experience" and you have faulty reporting, he implied.

Reporting Hit

Lucas saw a "barely adequate" job of reporting from Viet Nam. He said there were many cases of outright lack of knowledge of a military situation. He noted specifically stories of heavy plane casualties at Khe Sanh. "Actually," he said, "of 322 aircraft servicing the area — during a ten-day period — 26 were shot at, eight were hit, and only three downed." He said he wasn't placing entire blame on reporters but "they could be better prepared."

Continued

Fallon retorted that "we spend too much time worrying about the quality of the coverage. The truth is our people (reporters) are working hard against stupid officialdom . . . the criterion is to be a good reporter, and our organization usually sends trained reporters there. Fact is, we should stop bitching. We are doing a job!"

Swinton concurred with Apple that short tours of duty effected the quality of coverage of a complex war. He pointed out that among many other fine newsmen, AP's *Peter Arnett* and *Horst Faas*, both Pulitzer winners, have been in Viet Nam for six years. He said the practice of "six-month tours" by many media was essentially self-defeating.

Defends TV

Young demurred: "Just because they (some reporters) have lesser experience, this does not mean they're unskilled. Men in their twenties and thirties have done outstanding jobs out there." He admitted that tours of Viet Nam duty were about six months for the networks but said longer tours would go into effect.

Apple stressed greater experience: "Technical qualities are needed there—for instance, a good knowledge of French to cover political affairs."

Lucas said "another sort of expertise" was necessary — some military background. He indicated, however, that some reporters had a more profound knowledge of the country than officials there.

A further donnybrook opened up as Lucas and Rowan said that ARVN and the Army of South Korea had not received "balanced coverage." Rowan stressed ARVN had fought and stood firm during the Tet offensive.

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Apple disputed ARVN's capabilities. He said he had left Viet Nam prior to the Tet offensive and, at that time, "ARVN stank." He said he had covered them in Saigon and the Delta where "they were wretched and their officers corrupt." He specifically scored the 21st Division. When ARVN troops were attacked, "they ran — headed by a three-star general — in another direction . . . in full retreat . . . and spent their time on the way stealing chickens." He said American troops had to step in and bear the brunt.

Lucas disagreed. "I lived with the 21st Division. I saw no such evidence."

Swinton concurred that "corruption in South Viet Nam is beyond belief." Referring to his own early tour of duty in the area, he said: "I didn't know a corps commander in Viet Nam who didn't become a dollar millionaire within a couple of months." He cited more recent exposes to that effect by correspondents *Fred Hoffman* and *Hugh Mulligan*.

Corruption 'Inevitable'

Lucas said corruption was the inevitable consequence of war, but government curbs and black market controls were cutting it down. "I think we tend to overpaint the picture."

Gershen suggested that South Viet Nam be considered an under-developed country, yet it "has a good army" as such. "You know, people said the same thing about ROK's of South Korea. Today South Korea has one of the best armies in Asia. As for the ARVN. We are there to train them."

Lehrman asked whether there had been a tendency, in coverage, to paint



DEBATERS: The experienced professionals who argued the controversial subject were (from left) Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense *Richard Fryklund*, AP Assistant General Manager *Stan Swinton*, Life Assistant Managing Editor *Roy Rowan*, ABC News producer *Robert Siegenthaler*, and *The New York Times'* *R.W. Apple, Jr.* (Henry Senber photo)

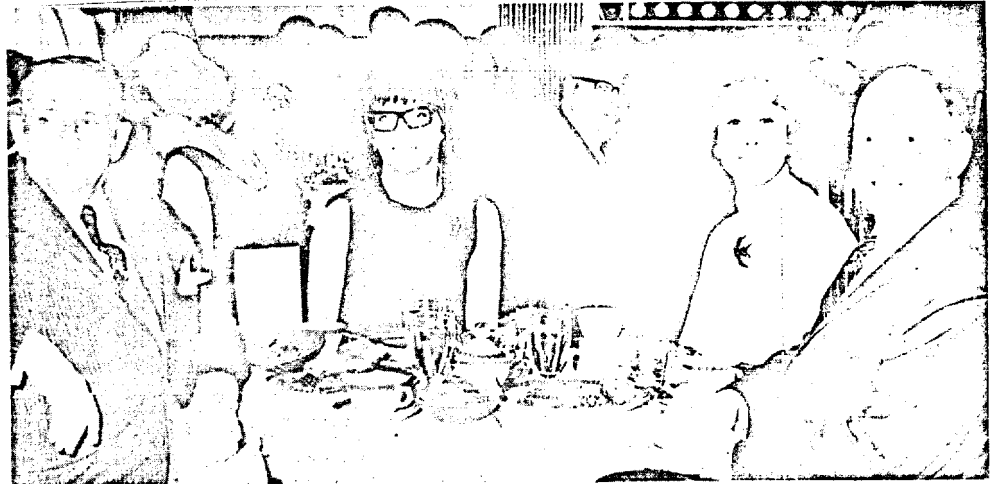


ON THE LINE: ABC News' *Bob Young* and UPI Foreign News Editor *Jack Fallon* defended the press performance in covering the Viet Nam war. (Richard Laird photo)



FROM THE FLOOR: Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Arthur Sylvester charged the media with ignoring the story in earlier days.

(Henry Senber photo)



LISTENERS: Among spectators at the discussion were OPC Past President Burnet Hershey, Jacqueline Earl, a British visitor; June Stevens; and USN Commander Fred D. Snyder, a Navy public affairs official.

(Richard Laird photo)

South Viet Nam in monstrous colors as compared to the Viet Cong and North Viet Nam.

Rowan said there had been little or no access to the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese except through French reporters and the like. And due to the nature of the war, correspondents work in virtual isolation with little means of comparing notes. Reports should be colated at a central point, he suggested.

Gershen hit play of news by daily papers. "Americans were dying in the village of Dak Son as Dr. Spock staged a sit-down in Whitehall Street." He charged that the press concentrated on Dr. Spock.

Swinton insisted the war story *had* been covered.

Not One-Sided

Apple said the picture was not one-sided. He recalled that *Life* had carried extensive coverage on VC atrocities, also that releases were constantly issued on the VC by the US Mission in the area. Possibly fuller coverage of US failings, in some cases, is due to the fact that "people expect the North to perpetrate atrocities... not the GI's."

Editorial personnel bears some responsibility for a lack of balanced coverage, Gershen said. He cited the picture of South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a bound Viet Cong on the street. He charged that nowhere was there the explanation that the victim was an enemy officer in civvies, that he merited summary execution under the rules of war. Concurrently there was down-play of an equally dramatic picture of a South Vietnamese officer's family slaughtered by the Viet Cong.

Swinton replied: "We carried the

(Loan) picture with a note to editors and a considerable caption. Apparently many of them did not use it. I'd say the American press has covered Viet Nam very well. This would be the telegraph editors at fault." It is extremely difficult to get pictures of VC atrocities, he said.

Then, parenthetically, he added: "I'd feel a lot better about it if General Loan hadn't asked for a picture of the shooting for his desk."

Apple defended "balanced coverage" in *The New York Times*. He recalled a *Harrison Salisbury* article describing "a peaceful town" bombed in South Viet Nam, which ran on page one. Flying over the same town some time later, pilots said there was nothing very peaceful there, rather that it was "one of the toughest targets" they'd had to face. Apple said his story to that effect also was carried on the front page.

Silent for most of the exchange, Deputy Assistant Secretary Fryklund commented that "if standards of credibility for reporters were as high for US officials, most reporters would have to turn in their cards."

No Lying

Discounting normal degrees of suspicion between the military and the press, all generally concurred that US officials were acting honestly with newsmen — that, as Gershen put it, "the Government is not lying in Viet Nam."

Fallon emphasized that reporters were doing a good job; they should get more credit "for covering an unusual war."

Siegenthaler wryly noted "a bit of self-flagellation here." He said printed media had done good work but with television, the viewer has a true realization

of war for the first time. Television covers without editorial interposition and no problems concerning a front page. He paid tribute to television's extensive background, interpretative reporting, as well as its depiction of the "face of war." Young added that certain war picture repetitions could not be avoided on television since that's the way it is... "that's war."

OPC Treasurer James Sheldon deplored an evident "coloration of news" again against the South and urged that South Viet Nam be compared with other underdeveloped countries for a measured analysis of the true situation there.

Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester, speaking from the floor, said one trouble with reporting from South Viet Nam stemmed from the fact that major news media largely ignored the area from 1961 to 1964. He said the United States in that period had actually paid the freight to get correspondents to go out there. He said that reporting had improved but lack of reporting experience in the area still was evident.

Gershen and Swinton said that, to the contrary, AP, UPI and *The New York Times* were there during those years.

The professionals suffered a chortling setback as a guest, noting he was simply a newspaper reader, put forth the pointed question. "Why," he asked, "did nobody anticipate the Tet offensive?"

Apple said possibilities were well covered. Lucas commented, "We were stupid, caught with our pants down." And Fryklund said, "The military knew all about it. They just got the date wrong."